

Voluntary Opacity: On Action and Gaining Voice (I)

An interview with **Derek Attridge** by Waldemar Rapior

1.

“Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defences against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so” (JM Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, p. 248)

The passage seems to me to pull in two directions, both entirely characteristic of Coetzee: (1) “The fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering” is clearly a major theme in Coetzee’s fiction, from the suffering inflicted by the USA on the people of North Vietnam and by European adventurers on the indigenous peoples of South Africa to the misfortunes of the aging or disabled body to the lives of animals. Coetzee is thus offering a key to his fiction.

(2) Coetzee insists that he is *not* offering a key to his fiction, but a personal comment, “*entirely* parenthetically” rather than as a significant contribution to the discussion with David Attwell; he is warning us, as it were, that his work may operate in different ways in the world even though it seems to him “transparently” just a defence against the power of the spectacle of suffering over him. He does not present himself as a better reader of his own work than, potentially, other readers.

2.

“Why has he taken on this job? To lighten the burden on Bev Shaw? For that it would be enough to drop off the bags at the dump and drive away. For the sake of the dogs? But the dogs are dead; and what do dogs know of honour and dishonour anyway?

For himself, then. For his idea of the world, a world in which men do not use shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing [...]

Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs. There must be other, more productive ways of giving oneself to the world, or to an idea of the world. One could for instance work longer hours at the clinic. One could try to persuade the children at the dump not to fill their bodies with poisons. Even sitting down more purposefully with the Byron libretto might, at a pinch, be construed as a service to